

The hill regions were protected by the Inner Line Regulations, whereas the plains and the princely domains were not. The steady population flow from mainland India, particularly from Bengal, into the plains of Assam and Tripura, accentuated the ethnic and religious diversity and introduced a nativist–outsider dichotomy to the simmering conflict.³

Partition led to a rise in the flow of refugees and migrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Tripura's demography changed within two decades as Bengalis became a powerful majority. The pace of demographic change was slightly slower in Assam than in Tripura but it was enough to upset the 'sons of the soil', provoking both armed conflict and mass protest movements and sometimes a mix of both. The fear that other North Eastern states would go the Tripura way has weighed heavily on indigenous people and early settlers throughout the North East and provoked the more militant among them to take up arms.⁴

A tradition of armed resistance to invaders had developed in the region even before the arrival of the British. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam for several centuries, fought back the invading Mughals. The Manikya kings of Tripura not only fought the Bengal sultans back from their hill region but also managed to conquer parts of eastern Bengal at various times in history. The Burmese were the only ones who overran Assam and Manipur, only to be ousted by the British within a few years. When the British ventured into the North East, they encountered fierce resistance in the Naga and the Mizo (then Lushai) Hills regions, in Manipur and in what is now Meghalaya. The Naga and the Mizo tribesmen resorted to guerrilla war, holding up much stronger British forces by grit and ingenious use of the terrain. As a result of the fighting, there were parts of the Mizo Hills where entire villages were reduced to being 'populated only by widows'.⁵

After the departure of the British, the Indian nation-state faced uprisings in Tripura almost immediately after independence and in the Naga hills since the mid-1950s. The communists, who led the tribal uprising in Tripura, called off armed struggle in the early 1950s and joined Indian-style electoral politics. Since the 1980 ethnic riots, Tripura has witnessed periodic bouts of tribal militancy, with the Bengali refugee population its main target. The Naga uprising, the strongest ethnic insurrection in northeast India, has been weakened

by repeated splits along tribal lines. Talks between the Indian government and the stronger faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which were started in 1997, are continuing, but a possible resumption of Naga insurgency cannot be ruled out completely.

Armed uprisings erupted in the Mizo hills following a famine in 1966. A year later, guerrilla bands became active in Manipur and Tripura. Almost all the separatist groups in the North East—Nagas, Mizos, Meiteis, Tripuris and now those from Meghalaya—have subsequently received shelter and support in East Pakistan and later in Bangladesh. By the early 1980s, the entire region was gripped by large-scale violence. There were fierce riots in Tripura and Assam. Separatist movements intensified in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur, later spreading to both Assam and Tripura. India's young Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took the initiative to arrive at settlements with the militant students of Assam, the separatist Mizo National Front and the Tribal National Volunteers of Tripura. Other insurgencies continued, however, and new ones emerged. Whereas earlier separatist movements, such as that of the Nagas and the Mizos, had challenged federal authority, the recent insurgencies of the Bodos, the Hmars, the Karbis and the Dimasas directly confront the regional power centres—the new states of North East.

Although the Nagas and the Mizos fought for a separate country and finally settled for a separate state within India, the smaller ethnicities like the Bodos and the Hmars have fought for autonomous homelands that they wish to carve out of states like Assam and Mizoram. The failure to achieve separate states radicalized the movements and made them turn to secessionist rhetoric. Territorial demands based on ethnicity in northeast India are very often sustained by historical memories of separate tribal kingdoms. The Bodos or the Dimasas fondly recall their pre-Ahom kingdoms, when they controlled large territories. The Tripuris and the Meiteis of Manipur look back at the long rule of their princely families to justify secession. A democratic dispensation like India's provides even the smallest of these groups scope to raise their demands. That Delhi has conceded many of them—and specially after some agitation or armed movement—have actually given these ethnic groups a feeling that they can obtain their imagined homelands with a little more effort, a push here, a shove there.

Very often in the North East, a negotiated settlement with a separatist movement has opened the ethnic fissures within it and created new homeland demands. The Hmars, the Maras and the Lais fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the Lushais against the Indian security forces during the 20 years of insurgency led by the Mizo National Front (MNF). But 20 years of bonding through the shared experience of guerrilla warfare failed to consolidate the greater 'Mizo' identity. After the 1986 accord with the MNF, India came to be seen as a source of protection and justice by the smaller tribes and ethnicities. Now, the Hmars and the Reangs want an autonomous district council for themselves, like the Lais, the Maras and the Chakmas already enjoy. Both tribes have militant groups (the Hmar Peoples Convention and the Bru National Liberation Front) who have resorted to violence and then came to some settlements with the state government in Aizawl.

The Bodos, the Karbis, the Dimasas and the Rabhas all joined the Assam movement to expel 'foreigners' and 'infiltrators'. But after the 1985 accord was signed by the Assam agitation groups with the Indian government, these groups felt the Assamese 'had taken the cake and left us the crumbs'.⁶ The result: fresh agitations, often sliding into violent insurgencies, spearheaded by smaller ethnicities demanding separate homelands. Within two years of the 1985 accord, the Bodos were on the warpath with a new slogan: 'divide Assam fifty-fifty'. Militant Bodo groups took the road of armed rebellion and terrorism, blowing up bridges, trains and buses, attacking troops and policemen, politicians and non-Bodo ethnic groups.

In 2003, a settlement was reached with the Bodoland Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF) and that led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council. Sometime later, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) also emerged from the jungles and is now involved in negotiations with Delhi. In the meantime, clashes between the NDFB and the former BLTF has sharply increased across the Bodoland Council area—a conflict that is further sharpened by the religious divide amongst the Bodos, with adherents of the Bathou faith (ancient animists) and Hindus largely behind the BLTF and the neo-convert Bodo Christians largely behind the NDFB. Here's a classic case of religion fracturing a strong ethno-national bonding—like the one suffered by the Bengalis in what is now Bangladesh.

The ethnic imbalance in power-sharing has often caused retribalization, which in turn has limited the growth of local nationalisms that could challenge the Indian state.⁷ After fighting India for fifty years, Naga nationalism remains an incomplete process due to at least three major splits within the separatist movement. Each of these splits—and the clashes that followed—followed tribal divides, leaving behind so much bad blood that all unity efforts to bring the factions closer have failed miserably. Even a China-trained leader like Muivah, a Tangkhul Naga from Manipur, has no hesitation branding Angamis as ‘reactionary traitors’ and his own tribe, the Tangkhuls (who form the bulk of the NSCN), as ‘revolutionary patriots’.⁸ On the other hand, the Tangkhuls are seen in Nagaland as *Kaccha Nagas* (impure Nagas).⁹ Only when an emotive issue like ‘Greater Nagaland’ surfaces, pitting the Nagas against the Meiteis or the Assamese, do the conflicts within the Naga identity evaporate for a while, only to surface at a later stage. It has been argued that if the Naga separatist movement had not suffered so many splits on tribal lines, it might have secured a much better deal from India in the 1960s than what the NSCN is now capable of.¹⁰

The trend has been no different in Mizoram or Manipur. The Kuki’s demand for a separate homeland that has pitted them against the Nagas has driven some smaller clans away and led to the emergence of a separate Zomi identity. The Hmars, Lais and the Maras have joined the Chakmas and the Reangs to challenge the Mizos. In Manipur, the Meitei identity has been reinforced through the rich Manipuri language and culture, but the Meitei refuse to recognize the Bishnupriyas as Manipuris. When the leftist government in Tripura recognized the Bishnupriya’s right to primary education in their own mother tongue, the Meiteis in Tripura and Manipur came out in the streets to protest against it. In Tripura, the Mizos in the northern Jampui Hills demand a regional council within the Tribal Areas Autonomous Council of Tripura to preserve their ‘distinct identity’, whereas their ethnic kinsmen in Mizoram are wary of similar demands by smaller ethnicities. The Reangs in Tripura resent attempts by the Tripuris to impose the Kokborok language on them. And they look back at the brutal suppression of Reang rebellions by the Tripuri kings as ‘evidence of ethnic domination that cannot be accepted anymore’.¹¹

The tensions within the tribes, as much caused by the oral and written traditions of conflict between them as by contemporary tussles for power and influence, have weakened efforts to promote a compact 'Borok' or tribal identity against perceived Bengali domination. At times, several tribes sharing the same religion have tried to promote a common identity on its basis, albeit with little success. The separatist National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) has tried aggressively to promote the Borok identity reinforced by Christianity, taking a cue from the Mizo and Naga rebel groups. The animist Reangs and the Vaishnavite Jamatias, however, resent imposition of the Christian-centric Borok identity and many of them have broken away from the NLFT.

Once India carved out the state of Nagaland in 1963, Assam's role as a sub-regional hegemon was threatened and its position as India's political sub-contractor in the North East was destined to end. Within a decade of the creation of Nagaland, Delhi effected a political reorganization of the whole region, through which three new administrative units were formed. All these three became full-fledged states in the 1980s, as India desperately sought to control violent ethnic insurgencies in the area. On the other hand, the break-up of Assam not only produced fresh demands for ethnic homelands within what has remained of it now, but it also drove a section of the ethnic Assamese to insurgency. With the hills gone, the Assamese turned to their valleys to find they were fast becoming a minority there. The anti-foreigner movement that rocked Assam between 1979 and 1985 led to large-scale, free-for-all ethnic riots. The ULFA, now the leading separatist organization in the state, was born out of that movement. Its initial credo was ethnic cleansing—it sought to drive the 'foreigners' (mostly migrants from what's now Bangladesh) out of Assam by force of arms.

Over a period of time, however, the ULFA's politics has changed. Sheltered in Bangladesh, Burma and Bhutan, and having to face the military might of the Indian state, the ULFA has denounced the Assam movement as 'one that was led by juveniles, who failed to understand that migration per se was not bad and had helped many countries like the USA to become what they are today'. The ULFA claims that Bengalis—Hindus and Muslims alike—have 'immensely contributed to Assam' and that 'those of them who feel themselves as part of Assam should be treated as its legitimate dwellers'.¹² It is difficult to ascertain how much of this policy shift on the part of the ULFA—

projecting itself as the representative of the *Asombashis* (dwellers of Assam) rather than the *Asomiyas* or ethnic Assamese—stems from tactical considerations, such as finding shelter in Bangladesh and gaining the support of Assam's large Bengali population, and how much of it is a genuine attempt to rise above the ethnic considerations to forge a secular, multi-ethnic identity.

The ULFA is only being pragmatic in trying to project territory and a multi-ethnic credo as the basis for a future independent Assam. It is merely acknowledging the polyglot nature of the state of Assam and of the rest of the region. Despite its racial difference from the Indian heartland, the North East is an ethnic mosaic, which is ironically reminiscent of India's own multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic polity. The ULFA seeks to restore the multi-ethnic and assimilative nature of the Assamese nationality formation process that was disrupted by racial-linguistic chauvinism on the part of the upper-caste Assamese elite in the 1960s, as a result of which tribe after tribe chose to abandon Assam, fuelling demands for an ever-increasing number of ethnicity-based states in the North East. Significantly, though the ULFA has targeted Hindi-speaking populations for large-scale attacks after 1999, it has avoided any attack on Bengalis, Nepalis or tribal groups that it regards as potential allies in the struggle against 'Indian colonialism'. Hindi-speakers have been seen by ULFA leaders as 'Indian populations supportive of the colonial rule'.¹³ Though it could well be that the ULFA intensified their attacks on the Hindi-speakers to pressurize Delhi to start negotiations with them on their own terms or under instigation from their external sponsors in Bangladesh and Pakistan. It backfired and led to intensified military operations against them because Delhi came under heavy pressure from political parties in Hindi-speaking states to act decisively against the separatists in Assam.

The ULFA's lack of faith in ethnicity as the basis for its political militancy stems from a realization that there could be no 'pure ethnic homeland' in Assam or anywhere else in northeast India. A broad-based Assamese nationalism, unless it caters to the distinct ethnic aspirations of the tribes and other communities in Assam, is a non-starter. The ULFA therefore, shrewdly enough, projects a future independent Assam as a federal Assam, where Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Lalung or Mishng, or even Bengali homelands can coexist, so long as the 'basic values of Assamese society and culture are